

PERSPECTIVES ON TRADITION

My assigned task in this address is to treat the theme of our conference—the development of doctrine¹—from the standpoint of systematic theology. Doing so raises the concerns of a theology of tradition, a thematic approach to theological inquiry that first appeared in Catholic history in the sixteenth century as a response to the Protestant scripture principle. The theology of tradition, though, has flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in various understandings of doctrinal development that have sought to reconcile historicity and the abiding authority of divine revelation in scripture and tradition.² In many respects, the problem for a systematic theology of tradition on the cusp of the twenty-first century is the same problem faced by theologians throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: how to speak well of tradition's continuity in light of the real development, often a religious euphemism for "change," that all things historical undergo. Indeed, the many critical studies of church history in the second half of this century have done much to expose the gaps in previous understandings of traditional continuity, and by doing so have stretched this notion of continuity to the breaking point.

The often troubled relationship between traditional continuity and traditional development will be the focus of this paper, in which I shall attempt to do two

¹The literature on doctrinal development is extensive. Representative works are Henri DeLubac, S.J., "Le problème du développement du dogme," *Recherches de science religieuse* 35 (1948): 130-60; Owen Chadwick, *From Bousset to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957); Herbert Hammans, *Die neueren katholischen Erklärungen der Dogmenentwicklung* (Essen: Ludgerus-Verlag Hubert Wingen, 1965); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969); Nicholas Lash, *Change in Focus: A Study of Doctrinal Change and Continuity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973); Jan Hendrik Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation: The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972); Bradford E. Hinze, "Narrative Contexts, Doctrinal Reform," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 417-33.

²For overviews of the theology of tradition, see Josef Rupert Geiselmann, *Lebendiger Glaube aus geheiligter Überlieferung: Der Grundgedanke der Theologie Johann Adam Möhlers und der katholischen Tübinger Schule*, 2nd ed. (Basel/Wien: Herder Freiburg, 1966); Walter Kasper, *Die Lehre von der Tradition in der Römischen Schule* (Freiburg: Herder, 1962); J. P. Mackey, *The Modern Theology of Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963); Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., *La Tradition et les traditions*, vol. 1: *Essai historique*; vol. 2: *Essai théologique* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960, 1963); Jean-Georges Boeglin, *La question de la tradition dans la théologie catholique contemporaine* (Paris: Cerf, 1998).

things. First, I shall try to show that previous understandings of traditional continuity have labored under an assumption that cannot effectively be reconciled with the critical investigation of the history that Catholics call their tradition. To do so, I shall enlist an optical metaphor in a manner akin, if successful, to Richard Rorty's optical reading of the Western philosophical tradition in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.³ Second, I shall sketch a theory of tradition unburdened by this assumption, a theory of tradition that accounts for continuity in a different manner from premodern and modern explanations. Whether this proposed theory is better or not, I leave to your judgment. I would state at the outset, however, that in my judgment a good theory will uphold two values. It will be faithful to a Catholic understanding of authoritative tradition and it will be faithful in the face of the historical-critical evidence.

PROSPECTIVE CONCEPTIONS OF TRADITION

A premodern or classical conception of tradition understands traditional continuity to be ensured by a hand-to-hand transmission of tradition's contents from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present moment. Modern or romantic conceptions of tradition—from the nineteenth-century Tübingers Johann Sebastian Drey and Johann Adam Möhler to contemporaries like Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx—understand traditional continuity to be ensured by the at least latent content of an ancient apostolic truth that manifests itself gradually in historical forms. While a premodern conception of tradition does not entertain the modern conception's thought of doctrinal development, both privilege the past in a similar way in order to explain the continuity of tradition. Both account for the continuity and thus normativeness of belief, doctrine, and practice through what we shall call a "prospective" conception of tradition. A prospective conception regards tradition as finished or completed and locates its finished or completed character in what has already transpired in its past. Premodern or classical prospectivity views tradition as a truthful deposit of faith handed down unchanged to later generations. Modern or romantic prospectivity sees tradition as a development that manifests but the historical nuances of an original apostolic truth. Aside from John Henry Newman's appeal to the imagery of clarification in his theory of development,⁴ neither premodern nor modern

³Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979). For Rorty, ocular metaphors put to the service of epistemology have obscured philosophy's proper task, and so their use has been misleading. I shall follow Rorty's lead with regard to the negative judgments expressed here about prospective conceptions of tradition. But the retrospective conception of tradition presented below offers helpful ocular imagery that realistically corrects the prospective conception's visual flights of fancy.

⁴John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed.

forms of prospectivity specifically use optical metaphors to convey their shared assumption about tradition's finished or completed character. And yet, an optical metaphor is especially helpful in appreciating the prevalence of this conception in Christian history, perhaps because the very notion of Christian tradition suggests the purposive "seeing" of divine providence. A prospective conception of tradition is "forward looking." Its perspective is situated in an authoritative past—in classical terminology, the apostolic age—and, from that point, the integrity of tradition emerges from a historical prospecting for the continuity of God's revelation in later times and places. The classical or premodern version of this prospectivity thinks of these instantiations as hand-to-hand transmissions of the original revelation that carefully preserve God's truth from corruption in a fallen history, while the romantic or modern version thinks of these instantiations as malleable appearances of God's truth in a more benign history whose change is now understood as development. But in both cases, tradition is conceived prospectively as a "looking forward." The apostolic truth that tradition promulgates, one might say, is imagined as an observer looking across history for self-reflections in texts, rituals, persons, and events. And whether these self-reflections are regarded as static receptions (premodern) or developmental disclosures (modern), they are judged to be tradition from the ancient stance and perspective of apostolic truth as the imagined observer.

The optic at work in this prospective conceptualization skews the ordinary conditions of time and space. As apostolic truth is personified as observer and judge, its glance across the span of tradition proceeds not from the present but from the authoritative past, or better, from a past that functions as an ever-recurring present. Like any human gaze, this observer's temporal line of sight across tradition ends at the horizon of the future, and yet, unlike human vision, the intervening landscape in this observer's visual field is the actual present moment that now is surveyed from a hypostatized, unchanging past in which the observer, a personified traditional authority, always stands, surveying the entirety of tradition from its own definitive perspective. Traditional continuity derives from the unity of this all-embracing perspective, which takes its point of departure from the apostolic age. What a personified apostolic truth might "see" across this landscape may change, but its perspective, a past that functions as an ever-recurring present, cannot. In this regard, authority in a prospective conception of tradition would be as resistant to change as would the stance, and so the perspective, of an observer who surveys distant objects, whether they be fixed or moving.

If this analogy is at all apt, then it should be clear that the personified truth imagined as the observer in a prospective conception of tradition is nothing less than the Spirit of God. Prospective conceptions of tradition take a divine perspective in their regard for the tradition. They imagine the historical sweep

of tradition from the standpoint of its earliest period and the authority attributed to it.⁵ The result is that tradition is conceived in terms quite unlike the ways it is actually experienced within the conditions of human historicity. While one can imagine a tradition seen through God's eyes, it would be much more appropriate to regard tradition through the eyes of faith, from a standpoint that is always the actual present from which the divine Spirit at work in history can only be perceived "in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12).

It is not difficult to understand why prospectivity has been the preferred, and indeed exclusive, conceptualization of tradition. Prospective conceptions of tradition offer the most lucid way of expressing the Christian belief in the absolute and universal truth of the Word of God. As a theocentric perspective, prospectivity assumes a privileged vantage point in order to judge, seemingly with the least ambiguity, whether or not particular instances of handing down or development are indeed continuous with revealed truth. A prospective tradition does much to protect the absolute and universal truth of divine revelation from either the slippage that could ensue in hand-to-hand transmission or the relativization that could more easily accompany historical development. Its stance in configuring tradition is taken in a pristine past in which truth is not yet subject to corruption. While the Catholic belief in the absolute and universal truth of God's once-given revelation is basic and indispensable, the prospective conception of tradition that has sheltered that belief is not. The Catholic belief in a closed revelation need not, and should not, extend to belief in a finished or completed tradition, if only because tradition continues in history.

The prospectivity of premodern and modern understandings of tradition stems from the perceived value of this conceptualization in explaining tradition's authoritative continuity. The modern appreciation for the historicity of belief, doctrine, and practice, however, has made the classical version of prospective continuity difficult, if not impossible, to maintain, since historical studies and hermeneutical theories respectively show that what the church now regards as tradition in fact did not and in principle could not have been so regarded in earlier times. The romantic version of prospectivity, which makes continuity an abiding constant within development, is the modern theological response to the untenability of the classical version. But modern understandings of tradition—whether Drey's dialectical model of a mutually fructifying past and present, or Möhler's organic model of the Spirit's unitive march through history, or various

⁵Jean-Pierre Jossua describes what I have called "prospectivity" not as a human's divine perspective but as one as humanly unnatural, i.e., as the timeless gaze of a human observer in flight across centuries. See Jean-Pierre Jossua, "Immutabilité, progrès ou structurations multiples des doctrines chrétiennes?" *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 52 (1968): 180. In his study of doctrinal development, Nicholas Lash voices his wariness of prospectivity, disavowing what he calls a "'bird's eye view' of the historical process" (Lash, *Change in Focus*, 148).

reception models, including the magisterium's in *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973)⁶—maintain their own brand of prospectivity by distinguishing between traditional form and content, the latter conceived as the unchangeable truth of tradition and the former as the changing conditions of historicity. In this modern hylomorphism in which content functions as a stalwart actuality and form as an adaptable potentiality, traditional content becomes the primeval observer surveying history for opportune receptions that faithfully preserve content's integrity, the steadfastness of its gaze unchanged by what it sees and even by what it in tradition becomes.⁷

The prospective orientation of both classical and romantic understandings of tradition reflects the Catholic commitment to the importance of continuity in the claims of tradition. And yet, as our analysis has suggested, prospectivity is a problematic conceptualization of tradition on at least two counts. First, premodern and modern prospectivity requires that tradition be imagined from a divine point

⁶Johann Sebastian Drey, *Kurze Einleitung in das Studium der Theologie mit Rücksicht auf den wissenschaftlichen Standpunkt und das katholische System*, ed. F. Schupp (1819; repr.: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971) 170-74, par. 256-61; Johann Adam Möhler, *Die Einheit in der Kirche oder das Prinzip des Katholizismus dargestellt im Geiste der Kirchenväter der drei ersten Jahrhunderte*, ed. J. R. Geiselmann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1957); "In Defense of Catholic Doctrine" (*Mysterium ecclesiae*, 24 June 1973) in *Origins* 3 (19 July 1973): 110-11.

⁷The form-content distinction typically has been invoked in influential twentieth-century Catholic theologies of development to explain how continuity can abide within historicity. Thus, Karl Rahner states that "if the [traditional] concepts are allowed to keep their plain, original simple meaning, we are bound to say that an explication of what is formally implicit in a revealed proposition is present only when the new proposition really states the *same thing* as the old one in other words, has the same content as the old one, however useful and necessary it may be for various reasons to formulate the new proposition" (Karl Rahner, S.J., "The Development of Dogma," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. C. Ernst [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961] 59). Cf. this same position theologically detailed in idem, "Considerations of the Development of Dogma," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. K. Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966) 18-20; idem, "Basic Observations on the Subject of Changeable and Unchangeable Factors in the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. D. Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 3-23. Bernard Lonergan makes the form-content distinction by noting that the "permanence of the dogmas . . . results from the fact that they express revealed mysteries. Their historicity, on the other hand, results from the facts that (1) statements have meanings only in their contexts and (2) contexts are ongoing and ongoing contexts are multiple" (Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1972] 326). Edward Schillebeeckx portrays an orthodox position on the reinterpretation of dogma as one in which "the aim of this reinterpretation is to purify our insights into faith of their earlier, and now obsolete, forms of expression. . . ." In such an approach, "what was originally intended through the use of this older form of representation will remain inviolably true" (E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Revelation and Theology*, vol. 2, trans. N. D. Smith [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968] 27).

of view, and not in the ways it is actually experienced by believers in history. If the Catholic belief in traditional continuity could be conceived in terms consistent with the actual experience of believers *and yet* in a manner that did not compromise the continuity of divine truth, then such a conceptualization would have an advantage over prospective explanations. Second, premodern prospective continuity cannot be reconciled with the facts of history or hermeneutical insights on the workings of human understanding. Modern prospective continuity can achieve such reconciliation only by resorting to metaphysical explanation that makes traditional content latent in the history of changing forms. If the Catholic belief in traditional continuity could be conceived in terms consistent with both the facts of history and an adequate hermeneutics on the one hand *and yet* in a manner that did not compromise the continuity of divine truth on the other, then such a conceptualization would have an advantage over prospective explanations. A "retrospective" conception of tradition, I propose, possesses both of these advantages.

A RETROSPECTIVE CONCEPTION OF TRADITION

A retrospective conception of tradition measures continuity not by taking a divine stance in the original event of Christian revelation and imagining traditional time from a privileged, timeless point of view, but by envisaging tradition from the actual limitations of the present moment and "looking back" to the Christian past to configure traditional continuity. A retrospective conception of tradition, like any modern model, represents tradition as a development or growth. Here, though, development is always acknowledged, believed, and, in faith, understood within the conditions of the present moment. This present moment, then, and not an idealized past *in illo tempore* imagined as a divine present, becomes the retrospective vantage point in tradition's visual field. And as the present-day observer surveys the past of a developing tradition, continuity shows itself in retrospect, initially in the judgments of individual believers and eventually in the shared judgment of all together.

One might be inclined quickly to object at this point that what we have called a prospective conception of tradition is most truly retrospective, since it concedes the highest degree of authority to the Christian past and so must highlight past authority in any judgment about the authentically traditional present. Certainly the premodern and modern conceptions do "look back" to the past for normative direction, as any conception of tradition does. But if our understanding of tradition can at all be enhanced by our use of these visual metaphors, then it is important to appreciate the way each metaphor highlights perspective and its role in defining traditional continuity. The premodern and modern conceptions of tradition look back to the past, though specifically to the apostolic age which immediately becomes the point of departure in tradition's visual field and from which traditional continuity can now be surveyed prospectively. This is a naïve or uncritical retrospection in which the observer

flees the conditions of historicity for the sake of a divine, though only imagined, perspective. A retrospective conception of tradition always makes the actual present moment its standpoint and from this human perspective looks back through the Christian past for a continuity that cannot be surveyed across a finished past but rather glimpsed continually in and as tradition's development. This critical retrospection blocks prospectivity by situating its regard for the past realistically, and by remembering that tradition is no more finished than the history in which it unfolds.

A retrospective conception of tradition approaches the task of accounting for a graceful history by distinguishing between the workings of the Spirit of God in tradition and the *recognition* of the Spirit's workings in a particular understanding of developing tradition. Prospective conceptions tend to blur this appropriate distinction by too quickly assuming a supernatural perspective and representing tradition from this divine standpoint. Portraying the tradition retrospectively involves a more modest approach to a theology of tradition, one properly aware that the activity of the Holy Spirit in tradition remains mysterious, even when that activity is represented as the unquestioningly abiding faith of the church. A retrospective approach to tradition, then, is aware of its own hermeneutical character. Recognitions of the Spirit's activity as at once continuous and developing are functions of the experience of faith, and so as interpretive as any human experience. Representations of the Church's experience in a particular schematism of tradition must reflect the interpretive character of subjectivity and manifest as well the even more markedly interpretive traits of objective, symbolic expression.

This interpretive awareness, which refuses to conflate a claim for the divine activity as tradition with the divine activity itself, stems from the retrospective model's commitment to representing the tradition as a development-in-continuity always from the standpoint of the passing present moment. If we take the present seriously as the inescapable point of departure for any configuring of tradition, then we must say that any grander description of the development-in-continuity of God's revelation in history begins in an act of faith in *this* time, *this* place, and in *these* circumstances. The act of faith as it unfolds in this or that faithful life is a regional experience, one bound by the general conditions of historicity but also by the fine detail in which these conditions make their way into a human life through the particularities of demeanor, memory, relationships, tragedy, success, love, loss of hope, anger, forgiveness, and a host of others, all occasions of sin and grace in which faith is formed in this way or that as it shapes its orientation toward God in life. Faith is not an individualistic experience. As an orientation toward God, faith is the experience of a relationship and, as Martin Buber has reminded us, it is the experience of the primary relationship in the realm of personal existence.⁸ Moreover, faith has communal

⁸Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,

dimensions that are not only the consequence of faith's desire to share its encounter with God but also the context in which the act of faith emerges and in which it continues to be sustained. Indeed, one might describe the desire to represent tradition as faith's yearning for its communal heritage. And yet, even if faith is not individualistic there is no denying that faith occurs in life as an individual's experience, and as such possesses a regionality, a limitedness, and a particularity that is characteristic of the act of faith itself—traits of the subjective encounter with God that need to be valued and appreciated for the many ways they manifest the religious life.

So distinctive is this regional character of faith that we might ascribe its traits as well to the community's apprehension of faith, which is bound just as much by the fine detail of historicity that ever unfolds in the present moment. While there is rightly an inclination in the Catholic tradition to portray the faith of the church as a unity throughout times and places, we should not overlook the extent to which that unity actually appears in individuals, in communities, and even in *the* community of the whole church in regional ways. The faith even of the whole church always is experienced in a determinate way with the passing of each moment, an appreciation for the particularity of faith in history that increases as we envisage the sedimentation this universal faith possesses in local communities and in the smallest reaches of the individual's encounter with God. Here is where a retrospective conception of tradition takes its stand—in the regional character of tradition's present moment that is reflected not only in the individual believer's experience but in every possible dimension of the life of faith.

Tradition is recognized, and in the community of recognition affirmed, from the perspective of regional acts of faith as these acts of faith look back to the past to find occasions for continuity in the beliefs and practices of the previous generation, a fourteenth-century generation, a fourth-century generation, or, and above all, a first-century generation of Christians. Since continuity is a relationship that can only be postulated through a judgment made in the present moment, the continuity in which tradition is established can only be affirmed retrospectively from a present standpoint.⁹ The tradition *can* be imagined prospectively, and we have seen that typically the tradition is. At its best, this prospective conceptualization is a way of picturing clearly the unity of tradition in which Catholic belief places much stock. At its worst, though, the prospective

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⁹The understanding of tradition developed here is sketched briefly in John E. Thiel, "Pluralism in Theological Truth," in *Why Theology?* (Concilium/Fundamental Theology: 1994/6), ed. C. Geffré and W. Jeanron (London: SCM Press; Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1994) 57-69, esp. 66-69. For a theory of tradition that shares many of these same concerns, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1997) 128-38.

conceptualization disguises the retrospective way in which tradition is actually encountered within the limitations of present faith.

Recognizing continuity with past belief and practice involves the retrospective gaze of a regional act of faith. But it is important to note that what this gaze falls upon and what it sees itself related to were themselves, in their own present moment, regional acts of faith bound to their own time, place, and circumstances and experienced as the faith of the whole church, yet in a particular time, a local community, or, initially at least, as the experience of an individual believer. The Gospel of John, for example, originally expressed the faith of a Christian community at odds in its belief to some degree with other Christian communities.¹⁰ However imperial its atmosphere, Nicaea was but a local Council to the bishops in attendance. The thirteenth-century theologian Peter Olivi made questionable arguments in support of a doctrine of papal infallibility that came to dogmatic definition in the nineteenth century. The judgments that the Gospel of John was divine revelation, that Nicaea taught orthodoxly on the eternal divinity of the Son of God, and that Olivi's position was infallible ecclesial faith were made by later Christian communities and eventually by the whole church searching for and postulating continuity with the past. Tradition emerges in judgments of continuity like these, which stretch beyond the recognition of the individual or a local community and become the communal recognition of the whole church, though one that still occurs in the regionality of a particular temporal moment. At this point, the judgment of continuity has itself become an act of faith—a belief in the truth, authority, and integrity of tradition. And if that judgment now become an act of faith recognizes continuity across generations of believers, universality is ascribed to it. And as that universality is believed and practiced in the present moment, it garners meaning in the church as something like tradition's literal sense.

A retrospective conception of tradition, then, represents continuity not as a relationship that extends prospectively from past to present but as a relationship defined by the perspective of the present moment looking back to the past. Considered most simply, continuity is a regional act of faith's recognition of its consistent relationship to a regional act of faith in the past. If this recognition becomes grandly communal, if it is embraced by the whole church, then the continuity is judged in faith to be tradition. This recognizing, embracing, and judging in faith involves a repetition that can be imagined to occur at various intervals of time but which, precisely because it is a function of time, actually occurs without rest. In the context of this repetition, retrospection cannot be halted and hypostatized as a single act of looking backward, and recognizing, embracing, and judging in faith. But actually every retrospection is the gaze of

¹⁰Raymond Brown details this tension between the Johannine community and others in Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

a present regional act of faith that looks back to a previous regional act of faith that in turn looked for continuity in its own past. By the same token, the present act of continuity-recognizing retrospection may, and in all likelihood will, be looked back to for continuity by any number of future acts of tradition-seeking faith whose present points of departure cannot now be anticipated.

Such a thoroughly temporal depiction of development-in-continuity might suggest a proliferation in faith's present searches for traditional meaning too unwieldy to produce more than the weakest, most individualistic, and capricious of continuities. We must recall, however, that the act of faith, though most regionally individual, is never properly individualistic, and always normatively measured by the faith of the church. This recollection applies as much to continuity-seeking acts of faithful retrospection in the past as it does to such acts in the present. Thus, an individual act of faith by any present believer may recognize a relational continuity to a past act of faith. That judgment, however, will not take shape as the judgment of tradition unless it is embraced by local communities and eventually by the entire ecclesial community. These same dynamics apply to the past faith that constitutes the object of a present recognition of continuity. While it is possible that individual past acts of faith that were never embraced by the community in their own time could be identified as continuous by and with a present act of faith, the more likely eventuality is one in which the retrospected past faith is embraced by tradition-seeking judgment in the present for its authority as a proven communal act of faith that in turn has already claimed continuity with its own past. In other words, envisaging the tradition as retrospection means that continuity widens across the ages as present faith looks back to the past and believes in its continuous relationship with previous communities of faith. Tradition is the layering of present affirmations of backward-looking continuity, one on top of the other, to form an overarching continuity defined from the perspective of the current experience of the church as it takes account of all the belief, practice, insights, and eventualities that lead it to see continuity in one way rather than in another, a perspective that will be redefined in however slight or surprising a way in future repetitions of this process.

Development in tradition occurs as this *same* act of continuity-establishing retrospection. As a consequence of its prospectivity, a modern conception of tradition distinguishes between continuity and development as separate realities within the traditioning process. The retrospective model, though, would have no cause to distinguish between continuity and development. What we call the development of doctrine ensues in the repetition of believing in the heritage of faith in which a belief in continuity aligns itself in a particular way to a previous belief in continuity that in its own day had done the same. Each present belief in continuity adds its own layer of retrospective continuity to tradition, causing it to "grow" as modern developmental models recognize, albeit from an idealized prospective stance. We would do well to understand this growth interpretively. The premodern understanding of tradition as hand-to-hand transmission lucidly

expresses the communication of belief and practice from generation to generation. But the prospectivity of this understanding regards this "handing down" as the tradition-constituting act. "Handing down," an undeniable fact in all aspects of cultural life, is better conceived as the possibility of tradition that becomes an actuality, an opportunity for tradition that may be seized, only in the present communal judgment of continuity. This communal judgment receives the past in a certain, determinate way that in its particularity establishes a new sense of continuity even when to all intents and purposes the present judgment of continuity seems not to be different at all from the continuity handed down. Traditional continuity is a development, and through this identity of continuity and development, the development affirmed as tradition is regarded as continuous.

In this holistic understanding, the distinction between the form and content of tradition affirmed by modern theologians and the magisterium as a way of recognizing doctrinal development while preserving the authority of the past no longer explains the workings of tradition well. If traditional continuity is itself development and traditional development the ever-repeated judgment of continuity, then there is no way to distinguish between an isolatable continuous content that serves as the essence of tradition and a historical, contingent form in which content is manifested. Although this distinction intends to maintain the authority of the Christian past, here identified by the rubric of content, it does so in a manner that is hermeneutically indefensible. There is no experience of a hypostatized "content" of tradition transcending its historical expression, nor of a distinguishable form that in principle could be "filled in" in this way or that. A hermeneutics based on those assumptions may be interested in promulgating a theory of interpretation intelligible in the thought-world of Aristotelianism or Romanticism, or in laying the groundwork for authorial responsibility to an "objective" subject matter that would please the likes of E. D. Hirsch.¹¹ But doing so requires an abstract distinction that prescind from the way in which tradition, or any subject matter, is actually encountered as an interpretive concern. Tradition is a historical reality. It unfolds in an incarnational world in which the Word has already become flesh and now eternally possesses an inseparable, unsubstutable concrescence of humanity that stands as a condition of Christian knowledge of the divine. Tradition's truth cannot stand apart abstractly from the conditions of historicity. Rather, the claims of tradition are *a posteriori*, and can only be made and interpreted as they are really experienced, i.e., in particular determinations of faith seeking their communal heritage and in which "form" and "content" name the same, present, retrospective configuration of developing continuity.¹²

¹¹E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976) esp. 50-73.

¹²Thomas Guarino has marshalled the most ardent theological defense of the content-form distinction, arguing that the distinction is necessary in order to protect the truth of divine revelation which is placed, of course, on the side of content. Guarino seems con-

At this point, some might be inclined to question the integrity of the continuity proposed in this retrospective conception of tradition. Can a continuity defined by present acts of retrospection bear the weight of tradition's true unity? Is retrospective continuity anything more than an evanescent perception ready to yield to its successor and now this last perception to its successor, so that tradition be no more than an array of finally unrelated continuities? Can a continuity that is itself a development transcend relativism? How can retrospective continuity be reckoned with the classical Catholic belief in the apostolic tradition, the gospel of Jesus taught to the apostles and which they through the inspiration of

vinced that blurring the distinction involves the eclipsing of content by form and the concomitant loss of revelation's timeless truth to a historicity of sheer relativism in which change can never possess the patterned order of development, an order supplied, it would seem, by a separable content. See Thomas G. Guarino, *Revelation and Truth: Unity and Plurality in Contemporary Theology* (Scranton PA: Univ. of Scranton Press, 1993). Moreover, in several articles Guarino presses his case by claiming that theological interpretations of divine revelation must avoid what he sweepingly calls "postmodern" or "nonfoundational" philosophies as the "form" to express the "content" of divine revelation. These positions (he seems to refer to historicist-phenomenological philosophies in the Heideggerian trajectory) lack a metaphysical ontology and so a correspondence theory of truth, both of which are requisites, he assumes, for a theological "form" consistent with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of revelation's content. See Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is *Phronesis* the *Via Media* for Theology?" *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 37-54; idem, "'Spoils from Egypt': Contemporary Theology and Non-Foundationalist Thought," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 51 (1995): 573-87; idem, "Postmodernity and Five Fundamental Theological Issues," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 654-89.

Guarino's position appears to be deficient on two, related counts. First, he seems not to consider that philosophies can be, and indeed throughout history have been, used theologically in discriminating ways, in ad hoc fashion, so that reasonable constructions themselves at odds with the claims of faith can be understood in ways that serve those claims. Second, in such cases of truly theological interpretation in which a theologian speaks of faith well, even while employing categories and language that prior to their interpretation were at least faithless and possibly even hostile to the claims of faith, the distinction between content and form evaporates as a way of accounting for the integrity of tradition. What remains is theological interpretation judged to be true by the present community because it is deemed continuous with, while at the same time renewing, past theological interpretations.

It would be interesting to read the 1989 publication of the International Theological Commission "On the Interpretation of Dogmas" as a statement of dissatisfaction with the form-content distinction. The text does invoke the distinction, claiming that dogmas "are the doctrinal form whose content is God's own word and truth" ("On the Interpretation of Dogmas," *Origins* 20 [17 May 1990]: 10). Yet, it condemns "naive realism" (ibid., 3) in the interpretation of dogmas and proposes that such interpretation can presuppose "no clear-cut separation . . . between the content and form of the [dogmatic] statement" (ibid., 12).

the Holy Spirit handed down to the church, itself the measure and norm of all later tradition? These are important issues that we shall address in turn.

Concerns about relativism are real and unavoidable whenever the fact of historicity is acknowledged, and since the retrospective model explains tradition in full view of historicity these concerns must be faced. The advantage of the retrospective model is that it accounts for tradition from the standpoint of its actual experience, which can only take place in the present and within the historicity of creaturely existence. Ironically, it may be the modesty of this creaturely perspective that prompts the charge of relativism. The long-standing history of prospective conceptions of tradition, both premodern and modern, defines a normative backdrop against which the retrospective model must stand in exhibiting its virtues for theological consideration. In light of the comparison, the retrospective model finds itself at a disadvantage. To the degree that the unity and universality of tradition are conceived in the manner of the prospective conception, the retrospective model can seem to be relativistic simply in its refusal both to view tradition from an imagined, divine standpoint and to portray unity and universality from that idealized perspective.

Judged apart from this prejudicial comparison, the retrospective model is indeed able to portray the unity and universality of tradition in a nonrelativistic way. A particular retrospection, after all, achieves the authority of tradition only when it is claimed as tradition by the whole church in a communal act of faith. The universality of tradition lies in this act of ecclesial commitment, the church's response to the graceful activity of the Holy Spirit in history and an act that itself is only possible through that same grace. This universality first and foremost should not be understood epistemologically or geographically, but as a Christian practice that in this case flourishes in the very act of the whole church's affirmation of continuity with the past. The claim for traditional continuity is a claim for temporal universality, the belief of the present-day community that its faith is the faith of the ages. And yet, this communally universal affirmation of temporal universality inescapably takes place regionally in a present ecclesial moment in which development ensues in the very act of affirming continuity. For those who view tradition in its entirety or "essence" or "content" as impervious to time, this ascription of universality to tradition's retrospective claims will seem insufficient or, worse, the passing mark of relativism itself. Tradition, however, is not an uncreated reality but rather one fully enmeshed in time and culture, the relative substance of historicity. The unity and universality of tradition across times and places, like the faithful practice that affirms it, is a claim made here and now, in this time and place, about the constancy of this faith through times and places, a claim that renews the tradition and through which the tradition grows. This communal claim for the unity and universality of tradition, like all acts of creaturely existence, is thoroughly relative—especially to the present, the past, all sorts of places, to scripture, and, above all to God. And yet, the scope of the claim, the unity and universality of tradition retrospectively affirmed,

staunchly denies relativism wherever the claim poses the constancy of tradition.¹³ Its repetition in each passing generation and in every Christian life should not be, for the community of faith, a sign of corruption but a sign of the renewal that every claim for continuity represents.

A retrospective understanding of continuity can be reconciled with the classical Catholic belief in the apostolic tradition, though in a way that avoids its prospective orientation. Retrospective continuity need not be one which in every respect extends from the present to the apostolic age in a line that if traversed in the opposite direction, from past to present, would remain unbroken. Certainly there are traditional beliefs, like the belief in the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God, that are ranked in the apostolic deposit because they have been affirmed in every act of retrospection throughout the ages, such that the present act of retrospective continuity affirming these beliefs embraces every previous act of their retrospective affirmation across every previous generation. There are other beliefs, however, that the church at some moment affirms as the apostolic deposit but which historical study shows cannot be traced unbrokenly from the apostolic age to the later moment of affirmation. The Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary is a good example. In 1854, Pius IX defined the dogma that Mary in her conception was preserved from original sin, a claim for the dignity of Mary in the economy of salvation and the expression of a long-held Catholic belief. The language of the definition portrays the dogma as "a doctrine revealed by God . . . [which] therefore must be firmly and constantly held by all the faithful,"¹⁴ and thus ranks the belief within the deposit of faith. Study of the history of doctrine, however, shows that this belief did not begin to gather strength in the church until the fourteenth century, that no less an authority than Thomas Aquinas did not hold it, and that the belief was beyond intellectual conception prior to the fifth century when Augustine's theological battle with the Pelagians did much to develop the doctrine of original sin. Faced with such results of historical research, those still sympathetic to premodern prospectivity may defend the unbroken continuity of the deposit by appealing to Trent's teaching on "unwritten" apostolic traditions,¹⁵ and attributing the textual silence of the early centuries to a steadfast verbal communication that only became literary in later times. Faced with the same historical evidence, those sympathetic to modern

¹³In other words, claims for the continuity of tradition are particularist beliefs *made* as universal claims that renounce relativism. See Gene Outka, "The Particularist Turn in Theological and Philosophical Ethics," in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, ed. L. S. Cahill and J. Childress (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996) 112-13.

¹⁴Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 24th ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965) 562, no. 2803. English trans. from *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation*, ed. and trans. J. F. Clarkson, S.J., et al. (St. Louis MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1955) 208.

¹⁵Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 364-65, no. 1501.

prospectivity typically defend the unbroken continuity of the deposit by invoking the distinction between latent and manifest belief, through which the unbroken continuity can be understood along the lines of the organic *Lebensanalogie*.

The retrospective model of development-in-continuity offers a better explanation of the apostolic deposit in the face of such historical evidence, because it does not base its view of continuity on prospective assumptions and because it understands continuity *as* development. To the degree that a retrospective approach regards the apostolic tradition in faith and from the present moment it can see and affirm continuity across the apparent brokenness of history. Both the premodern and the modern conceptions of tradition are embarrassed by the gaps in history that historical-critical investigation constantly turns up in their prospective accounts of continuity. Their defences are, respectively, a mild gnosticism and a romantic metaphysics. A retrospective approach offers ways of understanding the chronological gaps from a theological perspective in which continuity is affirmed across wider spans of time now construed by the believing church in the pattern of tradition. The retrospective affirmation of continuity in any moment affirms anew previous affirmations in which the tradition is sedimented from generation to generation. This layering of affirmations presently affirmed does not represent chronological time but instead postulates faithful bonds of unity and universality across times, places, events, and persons back to the apostolic age in which faith locates the tradition's most basic beliefs.

If the unity and universality of tradition be ascribed to the communal and always regional act of configuring tradition, then that retrospective affirmation can find relational continuities through the sedimentation of past beliefs that need not be troubled by chronological gaps. Our previous example of the traditional belief in the Immaculate Conception again can provide illustration. Considered from the retrospective standpoint, the church's current infallible belief in the defined dogma of the Immaculate Conception can regard the tradition as one in which fourteenth-century Christian communities, and Catholic ecclesial communities thereafter, began to see a continuity in belief that embraced previous retrospective affirmations of the sinlessness of the Savior, the dignity of Mary as the Mother of God, and Augustine's intensification of Paul's strong doctrine of human fallenness in a new configuration now affirmed as tradition. Since the sedimentation in previous beliefs now confirmed as the church's belief in the Immaculate Conception extends to the apostolic age, the unity and universality of Catholic tradition legitimately can be ascribed to the dogma now regarded, as it was not by Aquinas and so many earlier Christians, as a belief rightly included in the apostolic deposit of faith. Regarding affirmations of continuity as themselves developments means that the church's perspective on the deposit of faith moves in and as tradition. But that continuous development is always construed from the present moment, and from this standpoint the pattern of tradition is defined by a stance on the temporal design of its abiding faith and not by what is often the rival continuity of chronological time. Through

ecclesial eyes that look for traditioned meaning from the present to the past, ordinary time is always extraordinary.

OTHER RETROSPECTIVE ADVANTAGES?

The value of any theory is defined by its capacity to explain the available evidence. The theological advantage offered by a retrospective theory of tradition lies in its capacity to account for both the evidence of ecclesial faith and the evidence of historical criticism in its portrayal of apostolic continuity. But, I would suggest, the theory offers other advantages. Any theory of tradition must explain not only how the old becomes new but also how the new becomes old, and how the old occasionally ceases to be valued traditionally. In addition to the rather staid, retrospective affirmation of the whole church that we have called development-in-continuity, there are more striking kinds of development that arise in the claims of individuals and local communities about the Spirit's traditional presence to history.

Claims for what I would call "incipient development" voice the experience of a smaller number of the faithful that an uncustomary belief or practice possesses authority that now deserves recognition in the church as its tradition. Claims for incipient development such as an inclusive understanding of God as parent, or for understanding the preferential option for the poor as the Church's apostolic faith, or the only-recent theological arguments for the restriction of priestly ordination to males are not tradition, but may become so one day if they are affirmed as the faith by the whole Church. Though not now tradition, any claim for incipient development may very well be the Spirit's infallible truth, just as it may prove in time to be passing fancy. Claims for what I would call "dramatic development" voice the experience of a smaller number of the faithful that a particular belief, doctrine, or practice is developing in such a way that its current authority as authentic teaching will be lost at some later moment in the life of the Church, and that such a teaching or practice exhibits signs in the present moment that this final loss of authority has begun to take place.¹⁶ Claims for dramatic development such as the doctrinal untenability of the exclusion of women from priestly ordination or of *Humanae Vitae's* teaching on artificial contraception are not claims for tradition, but rather claims for how tradition's continuity should not be configured, and so reconfigured. Only time will tell whether any claim for dramatic development, nearly always a concomitant claim for incipient development, will prove true or not.

A retrospective understanding of traditional continuity can accommodate the historical facts of incipient and dramatic development, and the continuing possibility of such striking development in our own day and in the future. The retrospective model appreciates that continuity is shaped in the present moment

¹⁶See John E. Thiel, "Tradition and Authoritative Reasoning: A Nonfoundationalist Perspective," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 627-51.

as the community of faith understands its past to some degree in light of its ongoing experience of the Spirit's presence. Usually, this presence is fathomed as one that dwells in steadfast continuity with the long-affirmed continuities of the past. Occasionally, individual or locally communal insight discerns the Spirit's eventful presence to the church and the world as the surprise of *aggiornamento* or as challenge and call to prophetic response that rattle long-held, authoritative understandings of continuity. Believers in a tradition retrospectively conceived as the present, ongoing, and to some degree revisable faith of the church can make room for apparently new understandings that claim to be the real meaning of the gospel or draw the lines of continuity to the apostolic age in such a way that certain, previously affirmed continuities no longer have a place.

In conclusion, I would like to propose that the literary genre of the novel can be instructive in imagining how this ever-revisable continuity can yet be a real, authoritative continuity. The traditional novel's twisting plot need not, and when well executed does not, vitiate narrative coherence as set out to the point of shocked expectations that inevitably occur in the plot, just as they do in our lives or in history. The shocking eventuality, discovery, realization, conversion, or manifestation only achieves its narrative power against the backdrop of an established coherence. The appearance of the new does not discard that coherence but redefines it now in light of the new, enriching and extending the order of plot in ways that could not be anticipated before. The novelty of claims for incipient or dramatic development may initially shock traditional sensibilities. And that shock may arise as displeasure with the new or awe in the face of an undeniably veridical power. No matter whether the new first be judged ill or well, if the Spirit is the author of this unexpected turn in tradition's plot, then the effect of shocking development on its narrative coherence will not be corrosive but enriching and solidifying as continuity is defined anew.

At this point, however, analogy with the genre of the novel might seem to break down. The novel's narrative coherence is finally judged within its covers as the story moves through climax and *dénouement* and reaches an end. Tradition's plot is an extended *dénouement* following the narrative climax of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Its ending is never reached in time. Its story continually measures all stories because none follow it. Its pages of belief, doctrine, and practice are bound between the covers of creation and eschaton. This inability to close the book of tradition within history, to make some final judgment in time on the finished coherence of its plot, would seem to undercut the fruitfulness of comparing the workings of tradition with the novel. And yet, the novel can be instructive for tradition even in light of this difference.

Tradition's narrative coherence is like the coherence of the novel's narrative structure at any point short of its conclusion. At any such point, the reader has formed a certain understanding of coherence that the author vitiates at any future moment in the plot at the costs of the loss of narrative meaning and the betrayal

of the reader. Still, the story's coherence is ever being reshaped as plot unfolds, sometimes most meaningfully through narrative shock. In much the same way, tradition's continuity is configured as the ongoing course of its development this side of an eschatological ending, not only through development that promulgates previously drawn lines of continuity but also through incipient and occasionally dramatic development that may prompt the church to redraw these lines. And much in the manner of the novel's incomplete narrative coherence, tradition requires faith in the artistry of the author, though in this case a divine author with an infinite talent to lead believers to an ever-renewed appreciation for a continuity not vitiated but strengthened by tradition's unanticipated twists and turns. It is only human impatience that forgets that the exercise of this divine creativity in tradition takes the very time it has made.

JOHN E. THIEL
Fairfield University
Fairfield, Connecticut